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SUBJECT: PRT KHST: MADRASSA STUDENTS -- "THE REAL TALIBAN"
-- CITE GAP WITH GOVERNMENT AND U.S., SEEK MORE RESOURCES

¶1. SUMMARY: Madrassa students and mullahs in Khost have welcomed initial GIRoA efforts to reinforce and better fund balanced religious education in Afghanistan. Hundreds of students and mullahs have stressed to the PRT that the longstanding gap between religious students (who call themselves the "real Taliban" (Note: "Taliban" means religious student) - and the GIRoA has aided extremist propaganda and objectives. Minister of Education Atmar told a Khost leadership delegation that the most important project in the entire province would be a major madrassa adjacent to the UAE-funded Khost University campus. The facility will provide quality religious instruction in a professional setting tied to the government. Minister Atmar has publicly announced his desire to build government-approved madrassas in every province (pending funding) that would teach both standard subjects such as history and math as well as subjects related to Islam.

¶2. Khost madrassa students assert that religious extremists attempt to recruit them by stressing the lack of GIRoA attention to their needs. Notably, senior Khost mullahs, supported by Khost Governor Arsala Jamal, have advocated the formation of a new "Taliban Shura" comprised of religious students in Khost. Minister Atmar is expected to visit Khost in February to emphasize GIRoA's commitment to a structured and balanced program of Islamic education (reportedly, only 14 of Khost's 84 madrassas are registered). The PRT is working with provincial officials to help move that plan forward across Khost's 13 districts, providing a model for other parts of the country. END SUMMARY.

GAP WITH GOVERNMENT -- AND WITH AMERICANS

¶3. In regular discussions hundreds of madrassa students and dozens of mullahs have expressed concerns about the large gap that exists between them and the GIRoA and the coalition. One senior mullah said that the most effective way to defeat religious extremists over the long term was through support of moderate madrassas and empowerment of moderate Islamic students. In his words, "We must win this battle ourselves." He added, however, that the GIRoA's efforts to help religious moderates had so far been minimal.

¶4. A majority of madrassa students have openly questioned GIRoA and U.S. educational priorities in Khost. While many welcome the public emphasis on education (50 new boys, and girls, schools in 2007, for example), they question why resources have been largely limited to regular school

infrastructure and female education. One madrassa student remarked in a session in Khost's remote and mountainous Musa Kehl District that religious students there felt neglected "by the government and by the PRT." Several students have further argued that this gap makes "good Taliban" (i.e., themselves, in the classical meaning of "Taliban" as "religious student") believe the coalition is either indifferent to their needs or, more damagingly, anti-Islam.

¶15. Khost madrassa students have told the PRT that terrorist propaganda has effectively exploited this gap since 2001; one student, who spent time in Pakistan's madrassas, said that "they (extremists) ask us, 'What has the Afghan government or coalition done for you?'" It is customary in many Pashtun Afghan homes in border provinces for between one-quarter and one-half of male children to attend area madrassas (usually the eldest son, at a minimum, and several sons among large families in the more remote and conservative Pashtun belt areas). With past government and PRT efforts focused primarily on non-religious educational needs, divisions have grown. Even regular school teachers and non-religious students (most of whom have brothers attending madrassas) have voiced these concerns. They point to the perception that the GIRoA, alongside perceived U.S. indifference, has intentionally sidelined madrassas or deemed most or all to be sources of religious fanaticism, which they said undercuts stability across Khost.

MODERATE MULLAH AS MESSENGERS

¶16. Senior mullah and ex-PTS (reconciliation) program director Mullah Sardar has highlighted the need for moderate religious leaders in Pakistan who are Afghan natives to be welcomed

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back to Afghanistan. Recent increased fighting in Pakistan's tribal areas, he noted, has created an opportunity for Afghan education officials to recruit top, moderate mullahs back into Afghan mosques and madrassas. Sardar said the GIRoA would need to increase salaries, however; on average, "private" madrassa teachers collect 20,000-30,000 Afghani per month in fees -- ten times the official government salary.

¶17. Mullah Sardar noted that a majority of eastern Afghanistan's madrassa students prefer to be educated inside Afghanistan, but lack options. Many students have echoed this desire in discussions with the PRT. Several have said that increased fighting in Pakistan, especially in border areas, has led to a reverse flow of religious students from Pakistan traveling to Afghanistan for instruction -- a first, despite Afghanistan's more limited religious education options.

SHURA: REAL TALIBAN WANT GOOD NAME BACK

¶18. Khost Governor Jamal has supported calls by key Khost mullahs to establish a new "Taliban Shura," meaning a shura composed of students of Islam. Mullah Sardar has said that a forum for religious students would empower moderate voices inside madrassas, although all viewpoints would be respected.

The PRT has met with numerous groups of Khost madrassa students since summer 2007, all of which exhibited the full spectrum of Islamic ideology, ranging from extreme and openly anti-coalition in outlook to moderates and those in favor of U.S. and government reconstruction and security initiatives. The new Taliban Shura would allow these internal debates to be held in a formal body through which government officials could be regularly engaged regarding needs and concerns.

¶19. Several madrassa students have told the PRT that media reports of government officials describing "Taliban attacks, Taliban extremists, Taliban deaths, etc." have offended and alienated them. They stress that the widespread misuse of the term by both extremists and the international community has reinforced a desire to re-take "our holy name" so that a Taliban is once again a student. Two madrassa students in

central Khost said they understood why western media used the term to describe militants, but noted that the net effect inevitably led to more frustration within moderate madrassa populations. These self-described &real Taliban& said that the &fake Taliban& are, in truth, nothing more than terrorists -- and should be called terrorists, and not be allowed to share their name.

COMMENT

¶10. The construction of a major madrassa will begin in late January 2008. It will be adjacent to the new Khost University campus, and be of a comparable high quality. Minister Atmar has tentatively agreed to visit Khost in February for a series of education-related events, to include the opening of the new university campus and sessions with religious leaders reinforcing GIROA's commitment to Islamic education. The Ministry of Education (MoE) appointed a new deputy director for Islamic education in Khost and plans to appoint such directors in every province, a visible step that the resource-deprived madrassas and their students welcomed. Additionally, the GIROA will build a new district madrassa with CERP funds in Sabari District in the coming months and has already identified a site for a second madrassa.

¶11. Equally important and revealing, moderate madrassa students and mullahs in Khost look to the PRT and the coalition for greater awareness of their needs, not necessarily direct funding. The current gap between them, their government -- and with the PRT -- does not require an overt U.S. role, which would likely lead to negative perceptions of U.S. interference. Reinforcing GIROA and MoE plans to build government-supervised district madrassas that teach both the traditional curriculum of the Islamic faith as well as secular subjects, however, represents an essential and overdue counterinsurgency step. Khost is a frontline province where current ideological battles internal to its mosques and madrassas remain heated and with lasting repercussions. Madrassa students here persuasively argue that only they can defeat religious extremists from the

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inside, but only with more direct Afghan government support that is sufficiently resourced.

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